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## Building Bridges

Reverend Richard Hardy

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The first thing I learned in seminary was to preach about God and to preach about twenty minutes. How many of you here would like to take my place now because with all of these distinguished ministers here, I'm just not used to preaching to a gathering such as this. In the last twenty, no twenty four years, I've preached in over thirty churches in Vermont and New Hampshire but never to an audience, a congregation like this. I look down and I see Orwell Tousley, .....and I think, Wade Hiltedidel up there.... You know, I was told when your heart is full it's hard to speak so. perhaps knowing that I haven't preached now in over six months, you'll know that I'm going to be a little rusty and you'll be a little forgiving.

By a burning bush God spoke to Moses: "Take off your shoes for the place you are standing is holy ground." And then I somehow remember those words in Boston at a

Restaurant, Durgin Park. At the top, a sign, framed, "There's no place like this place, anywhere near this place so this must be the place". The place the psalm called, "the secret place of the most high", where somehow the love of God and the love of you people come together and enable a minister to preach the word of God. It's a great joy in being a minister like Tom Carr has of being a minister of a church like this but to come back after all these years and to see the Church full of vitality and on the march, I think of those words Tom wrote to me in his letter about you people. He said you are yearning for more and willing to do things differently. You may be the only church I know of in New England willing to do this. My memory is failing but I do remember the six people who came to my church in Framingham back in 1954. Six of you, Bill Rowland, Bob Rowland, chairman, Bill Tuller, Ed Tuller's brother, Joe Helms, Lena DeLong, Peg Allen and Ruth Daley and they came and sat in my congregation and were listening. As a result of that, they invited Helen and me to come down to West Hartford and look at the wonderful parsonage and the schools and the culture and the church and they issued a call

and you don't know this until now - I turned it down.. I went back to Framingham and said, "This is where I belong." There were so many things I thought were

better in the church up there than here but something happened. The next Sunday all six came back and were in the church. I talked more with Helen about it. They gave the feeling that it wasn't just myself they wanted but having met Helen and our children, four of them from 3 to 9, they thought we'd fit in wonderfully. They also talked about the need that was here and they had a mission...So, with Helen's encouragement and those six people that are responsible that I'm still here today, I just want to say how much my family owes to you people here and the schools and the culture and the men and women in this church they looked up to that helped to guide them into the choice of their careers that have to do with the healing mission and the social work that's needed in the world today and you who know Helen, you know what she has meant in my years of ministry. Thank you for inviting me here today. You know somehow those six people I mentioned are here with us and there are a lot of people here whom we cannot see who have enriched our lives.

And as you sit here this morning, I want you to think of some of those people in your life, your teachers, your companions, they may be your relatives. We are here to thank God for these 150 years and the part they have played in our lives. How do we remember? How should we remember? What should we remember of the past? The word "remember" is in the Bible 147 times. In Deuteronomy, Moses told the Israelites to remember the things of old, "Consider your long past. Ask the elders, they will tell you" and the psalmist looking back said, the boundary lines have fallen to me in pleasant places." So what do we remember? What should we remember this morning here? Tristram Coffin, a poet in Maine tells about riding along in a car or train and seeing telephone poles and the houses and all the things that flash by but then noticing that the fleecy clouds above and the mountain top seem to go along with him. They didn't flash by. And it's a parable of our lives that we need to sort out the memories that shape our lives and stay with us. And somehow this morning we need to let the sunshine through those fleecy clouds that have to do with this church. Somebody that has made a difference in your life, somebody that may still be with you now.

Let's go back to the year 1858, the year that the church was founded. Please read the history of the church. I can't begin to mention all of the important things in that history but in 1858, you know that was the year Teddy Roosevelt was born. 1858 was the year that West Hartford celebrated the hundredth anniversary of Noah Webster and his dictionary that sold 100,000,000 copies. 1858 was the first year the New York Symphony Orchestra, played its first concert, the year that the Baseball Association of America was formed. It was two years before Lincoln was elected President, three years before the Civil War, and for you Travelers men, five years before Travelers was organized here in Hartford. The first pastor, Elisha Cushman in 1859, a Yale graduate, he came here on April 1<sup>st</sup> and within a month there was a baptism. Some records say four, some say ten that were baptized. But I guess Congregationalists were not pleased because the Congregational minister, in some kind of a prayer, said, "...roving Methodists and plunging Baptists might come to naught and be no more". In 1861 when the church was down there on the corner of Farmington

Avenue and North Main Street, Elisha Cushman preached a sermon at the beginning of the Civil War in which he called for tolerance and understanding and even sympathy for the people of the South. The next Sunday there was a Confederate Flag at the top of the steeple of the church down on Farmington Avenue and Elisha Cushman resigned. But, to the everlasting credit to the people of that church, they didn't accept his resignation and he was allowed to continue to preach for over a year before he left. But, you know, times were different in those days. My great grandfather went into the Civil War at the age of forty three in 1862 and I have the little book that was found on his body when he was found in the prison camp in New Orleans, LA. It was given by the government, by the War Department in which it begged the men to be good to the enemy, to be good Samaritans to the people they captured; never to hurt anybody that they captured so Elisha Cushman was in the spirit of that time, a spirit in which I wish we could revive today.

Go forward to 1889. Thirty years before women's suffrage came into power in 1919. The church here voted to have all women over 21 on an equal footing with all men in voting in the church. That was a great advance in those days and it should be appreciated. Going ahead to 1900, the church had an anniversary. We have few records about it but I think we need to get a feel of that day. 1908, fifty years. Electricity was coming into power, telephones, a subway in New York, Henry Ford produced his first Model T, Robert Perry was on his way to the North Pole and Harper's Magazine felt that we were riding high. They opined in their weekly, "Is it possible that at this very moment we are living at the dawn of the Golden Age." That was one hundred years ago. Within ten years America was plunged into World War I. A few years before that, Woodrow Wilson was elected President. A Presbyterian whose office I had been in at Princeton University where he had been president. In his inaugural address, Woodrow Wilson said, "America seeks no earthly empire built on blood and force; no ambition lures her to the thought of foreign dominions, the legions we send forth are not armed with the sword but with the cross; she cherishes no purpose save to merit the favor of Almighty God. For three years Wilson tried to make peace and when war was declared, he went into that office and he wept and he wept and he wept and then he declared a National Day of Repentance and Mourning.

I would suggest that when building bridges that the bridge we most need to be aware of is the bridge between war and peace. There's something we can do about the bridge between poverty and the justice that will eliminate poverty. The disparity between the rich and the poor grows at such rapid rates even at this very time of recession. I don't have the brains to know what we can do about it but we have to do something about it. The text that was announced as a possible text for my sermon was back in the words of Mica the Profit speaking for God said, "I will show love to those who are called unloved and to those who are called, 'Not My People' I will say, 'You are my people' and they will answer, 'You are our God.'" What a vision combining Evangelism and social action.

In my bible, I have, next to the Prophets, the words of Edward Gibbon writing on the Fall of the Roman Empire, the five causes of the Fall of the Roman Empire that was so strong in its day: 1) the undermining of the sanctity of the home; 2) higher and higher taxes; 3) the mad craze for pleasure and entertainment; 4) the building of gigantic armaments when the real enemy is within; and 5) the decay of religion and in using it for political purposes.

When I get discouraged, I think of the year 1809 about fifty years before this church was begun things were really bad in Europe. Remember 1809? That was the year Lincoln was born but Napoleon was riding over Austria, conquering Austria. He put Pope Pius VII in jail, he had divorced his wife Josephine and he was the Master of everything and everybody. But also in 1809, Abraham Lincoln was born. Gladstone in England was born. Tennyson was born, Edgar Allen Poe was born, Charles Darwin was born, the man who invented reading for the blind was born, Chopin was born, Mendelssohn was born. In 1809 Napoleon was bent on burning bridges but God was bent on birthing babies and that's where we need to look. I'm so glad you take time with these children. We never know when we have a group of children like this, what's going to come out of those children. Anymore than this church knew when Ed Tuller was a baby here and Ralph Seguire and Richard Matera, three ministers now retired have come out of this church. We never know what is in there with these young people.

Well, I'm going to skip over some of the things I have here. We didn't come just to listen to a sermon. I'm going to skip over to what I wanted to say. I had a lot to say about music and my appreciation of .... The one thing I did that was good while I was here was what I had to do about bringing Bruce Hector here forty... (Loud Applause) I'll take credit for that.

I'll skip over what I was going to say ...some things about music and what this has meant but music builds bridges that sermons can't build because you can listen to music without having to....you pray without words when you listen to music. It can help to point you into the future.

I want to talk about, finally, a bridge into the future. When I think of the most famous person that Hartford is known for, the most famous man, you go down Farmington Ave., you go by his old mansion. Mark Twain. He built a lot of bridges with his mouth and with his brains a lot of wonderful books but he built no bridge to the future. He soured and soured and soured the older he got. I have a book that the Business and Professional Women gave to me. When I left the church they were glad that I was leaving (laughter) and they gave me a book about Mark Twain. The Harold Adrions have given me a book all about Mark Twain. Mark Twain soured on the future as he got older. He said there's one thing sure, that if Jesus Christ returned to this earth today, he'd be anything but a Christian. He also said that the more he looked at humanity, the more he wished that Noah had missed the boat. And is it any wonder that when his daughter was with him in Europe and he was introducing her to some of the big wigs of Europe, she said to him, "Daddy, you seem to know everybody that's big except God." So what about the bridge to the future? Whether you're a teenager or a four-score ager; I call them four-score agers. We awake each morning perhaps

wondering why we're here, wondering what lies ahead, what we have to hope for, what's going to be unexpected, what we're living for....and you know, when we are discouraged, hope is that feeling that we have that the feeling that we have isn't going to last. That's hope; knowing that the feeling we have isn't going to last.

St. Augustine once defined hope this way: he said that Faith is that God is, love is that God is good, but hope is that God is going to win out, that God has control. That's the kind of Future we need to look forward to".

About thirty years ago, I did a rather foolish thing. I ventured to jog up Mt Washington toll road, eight miles and I didn't make but I learned. After four miles, I was about ready to quit. It was all ascent, straight up but suddenly I realized I was above the timber line and I looked around and I saw how far I had come and it renewed my energy and I kept on going and I was about ready to quit when there was the top, Mt Washington, the little building up there. That gave me enough energy to walk the last mile and I thought of the words of Isaiah, "They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." That's what we have to look forward to as we get older. Your spirit is something that cannot grow old. Your body can grow old but what's in your body, your spirit can never grow old. God has given you that. Sometimes we call it the Holy Spirit. And the closer we are to each other, and the closer we are to God, the more we feel that Spirit within. We used to climb Mt Monadnock as a family and I think some of you have been with us when we've done this and that is that we gave instruction that if you got off the trail or you got tired and you got lost, keep on climbing because we can all get together on top. There's only one top and if you can see the top, and get to the top and we'll all be together. In your original historical manuscript, you say there are three things this Church is going to do: Worship, Education and Revival. We have a new word for "revival" it's called "renewal". I would dare to believe and this is my close, that in every one of us today, there is deep down and I know sometimes it's hard for us even to admit it, is that desire for a closer walk with God. That's something that will bring something back to us that perhaps we had and maybe have lost a while. But oh, if the end of these days of celebration could be that some of you had that renewal of that spirit of the living Christ within you, that brings you together and pushes your church forward, it would all be worthwhile.

I close with these favorite words of mine from a British poet,

"I ride forever seeking after God.

My hair grows white and all my limbs are loose

But in my eye the star of an unconquerable praise

For in my soul one hope forever sings

That at the next white corner of a road,

My eyes may look at Him."